

There's a URL for That

By JILL P. CAPUZZO

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LARRY VECCHIO, a Monmouth County real estate broker, was ahead of the curve in the late 1990s when he started buying up a number of generic-sounding Internet domain names that



Aaron Houston for The New York Times
Larry Vecchio, a broker, has been offered a lot of money for some of the URLs he owns. Instead, he is trying to build a network of hyper local real estate Web sites.

he thought might come in handy one day.

The URLs he first went after were “Homesin(fill in the blank).com,” the blank being the names of the 20 towns his agency, based in Hazlet, served. Once he saw how easy and cheap it was to make these purchases — for a one-time flat fee or annual rentals — Mr. Vecchio started buying up every similar-sounding URL (Uniform Resource Locator) he could get his hands on.

“I just thought, if you were going to look for a house, what would you type in?” he recalled. “So I looked up ‘homesin...’ and nobody had them.” Among those he learned were available were HomesintheUnitedStates, HomesinNorthAmerica and HomesinNewYork. (One that had already been spoken for was HomesinNewJersey, which was owned by someone in the Canadian town of New Jersey, from whom he was able to buy it for \$1,500.)

Today he owns 1,300 URLs, including “Homesin...” and “Condosin...” for just about every municipality in New Jersey, as well as towns throughout the country. He also owns the domain names, meaning that by adding a backslash and the name of any town in the United States, he has a network of some 35,000 URLs.

As the vast majority of house hunts happen over the Internet, Mr. Vecchio’s URLs have a colossal resale value — far exceeding what he paid for them. For instance, he said he had been offered \$100,000 for “HomesinForeclosure.com.” But this 54-year-old Web visionary has bigger plans for his holdings.

Until recently, most of the Homesin... pages have had little or no content. But Phase 2 of Mr. Vecchio’s plans for HomesinYourTown.com envisions the URLs as the go-to real estate search-and-information site for anyone looking to buy a home in New Jersey and beyond.

He has recently bought access to real estate listings nationwide, at a cost of \$4,000 a month; he plans to populate his Web sites with these by the end of February. This will put him on similar footing with many other national real estate search sites, like Zillow.com, Trulia.com, the Multiple Listing Service, Realtor.com and Homes.com.

But what he is hoping will make his sites more valuable are the “town leaders” he is trying to get to host each site: local agents or mortgage officers who will blog about area homes, schools, businesses and other community news in exchange for being the featured real estate professional on the site. By combining this hyperlocal reporting with real estate listing information, Mr. Vecchio said, he has developed “the first social media real estate site.”

At the 2011 Tri-State Realtors Convention in Atlantic City in November, agents were competing for blogging rights on the URLs of some towns, said Christopher Sheridan, a real estate marketer who is signing up the local bloggers for Mr. Vecchio’s sites.

“If you snooze, you lose,” said Mr. Sheridan, who has thus far signed up 180 town leaders, most of whom are paying the company \$50 a month for that privilege. “If somebody wanted a town, I told them they better take it, or at least put something down.”

Judith Weiniger, a Somerset County agent, recently signed on to be the featured broker on the HomesinWarren.com and HomesinWatchung.com sites. She described her venture as part of her overall commitment this year to embracing social media as a selling tool.

“I’m a big believer in this hyperlocal social media strategy,” said Ms. Weiniger, an agent with Re/Max Premier in Warren Township. “People are more apt to trust a person or a business if they know someone else trusts them. I’m looking to build continued good will.”

National Web-based real estate sites, too, are adding social media elements to their offerings, with blogs, links to Facebook and Twitter, and user apps. Patty McNease, the marketing director for Homes.com, said her company’s site was now posting a blog almost every day on some general-interest real estate topic. As far as localizing the information goes, Ms. McNease said, the site offers a question-and-answer section allowing readers to post queries about a given market, and “they’ll be bombarded with answers from local realtors within a few hours.” The goal at Homes.com — the country’s fourth-largest Web-based real estate site, according to comScore.com, a digital data analyst — is to “try to capture and keep visitors at our site as long as possible,” Ms. McNease said.

Ian Lazarus, a broker with the Landis Company in Sea Isle City, signed on to host the Homesin... sites in Sea Isle City, Cape May and Avalon. He said he had been slow to embrace the blogging component of real estate sites, which in recent months had provided him with 50 to 60 leads, the majority of them people living outside of New Jersey.

“He’s got 1,300 URLs, and everyone is linked to the others,” Mr. Lazarus said of Mr. Vecchio. “That’s a lot of juice. And for me it’s important, because it’s something I can never build.”

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